
**Increase Partnerships with Universities, Native American Tribes, Land Trusts,
and Other Stakeholders to Identify Research Needs and Develop Best Practices
to Protect and Preserve Natural and Cultural Resources Initiative #29**
(STRATEGIC GOAL #4 Protect and Enhance Natural and Cultural Resources)

Problem Statement

The Department is charged with protecting natural and cultural resources of statewide, national, and global significance. As with other aspects of the State Park System, not only are the resources themselves in a degraded condition, but so too are the Department's systems and practices that support resource protection. While the Department's natural resources management systems are built on a foundation of sound science and strategic conservation, they have not kept pace with modern technological advancements and innovations in resource stewardship.

The Department's cultural resources protection efforts are similarly steeped in professional standards, but those management systems are also under-developed. In both natural and cultural resources management, the identified management need far outstrips the capacity of available staff and funding to manage.

Absent a significant re-investment in natural and cultural resources management, the Department will fall short of its Mission, which includes protecting California's most valued natural and cultural resources. Essential elements of the natural and cultural fabric of the system are already falling into disrepair and decay. Ecosystems upon which people depend for clean water and wildlife, not to mention landscapes Californians depend on for inspiration and education, will be lost. Future generations of Californians may be too distracted to notice their passing, but the world would be further depauperized by the degradation of our systems.

The Department is engaged in partnerships at all levels – including partnerships that provide funding and labor to address resource needs on the ground; research partnerships that address significant management questions; and partnerships that support local or regional conservation planning. However, the Department is unable to avail itself of the full spectrum of opportunities that partners could provide, owing in part to its limited capacity and its under-performing systems.

Initiative Description

This initiative will seek to work with a range of stakeholders – such as Native American Tribes, Land Trusts, and others – to develop best practices to protect and preserve natural and cultural resources. An important sub-set of this initiative will engage Universities and other members of the research community to pursue key research questions related to resource protection.

Anticipated Benefits of this Initiative

Best practices in resource management should focus both on on-going management activities and on restoration activities. The management of natural landscapes in the State Park System ranges from isolated and rare ecosystems to vast native landscapes, and includes many degraded habitats that require restoration. These actions require the application of scientifically based best practices in a complex regulatory environment. The System's cultural resources – ranging from small archaeological sites to historic landscapes and huge curatorial requirements -- similarly require technical expertise and the application of techniques used by professionals worldwide and applied consistent with state and federal mandates.

Inviting partners – such as practitioners in the Tribal, non-profit, and academic communities – to critically evaluate current practices, the Department will lay the groundwork for improving its current practices. It will also foster deeper and more sustainable partnerships.

Possible Implementation Challenges and Missing Data

Data and descriptions of current practices are readily available, but under-utilized. Significant staff work would need to be invested to summarize current systems and approaches. Data relating to external practices of analogous organizations would need to be gathered and summarized. Both summaries must capture both the resource stewardship and legal/mandate considerations of modern land management. Consultants or graduate student researchers would be best suited to the external models exercise, requiring requisite funding and oversight to support.

Given the disparate interests and resource management models applied in this country, engaging stakeholders to inform State Park practices will likely be challenging. To the extent practicable, the Department-Stakeholder interaction should foster shared learning and be used to identify broad categories of best practices that can be applied to the state park context.

While most current specialist staff in the arena of natural and cultural resources management readily embrace partnerships and innovation, it may nevertheless be difficult to lay bare current practices that are deficient. Many deficiencies are well known to professional staff that lacks the resources, individually or collectively, to implement “state-of-the-art” approaches.

Process

People

Members of the Committee already include Transformation Team members with broad expertise in natural resources management and interpretation. Additional committee members representing cultural resources (perhaps through the Archaeology History and Museums Division, and/or State Historic Preservation Office) are critically needed. One Committee member has been drawn from the community of external natural resources partners; another from the State Historic Preservation Office could fill a similar role.

Additional contributors will be drawn from the Natural and Cultural resources functions and Interpretation (HQ Divisions, Field and Service Centers), as well as other disciplines. These staff could summarize current practices and systems. Consultants or graduate student assistants could review and compile summaries of best practices used in other resources management agencies and entities.

Critically important will be engagement of current partners and other stakeholders. Careful consideration will be given to those partners who could be assembled as a standing panel to provide both a range of technical views and an opportunity for shared learning.

Initial Tasks

Current management systems of the Department will be summarized, and surveys and reviews of standard practices used by other land-management institutions will be undertaken. Following such background research, key members of the stakeholder community – including current state park partners and others – will be convened to explore findings and provide feedback. These stakeholders will be engaged in shaping the findings and recommendations going forward.

Research partnerships constitute a subset of the practices this initiative will focus on. This undertaking will require the Department to develop systems that not only focus the efforts of researchers towards priority management-oriented questions, but that develop systems to report the results of that research to the community of practitioners and make them useful to on-the-ground managers.